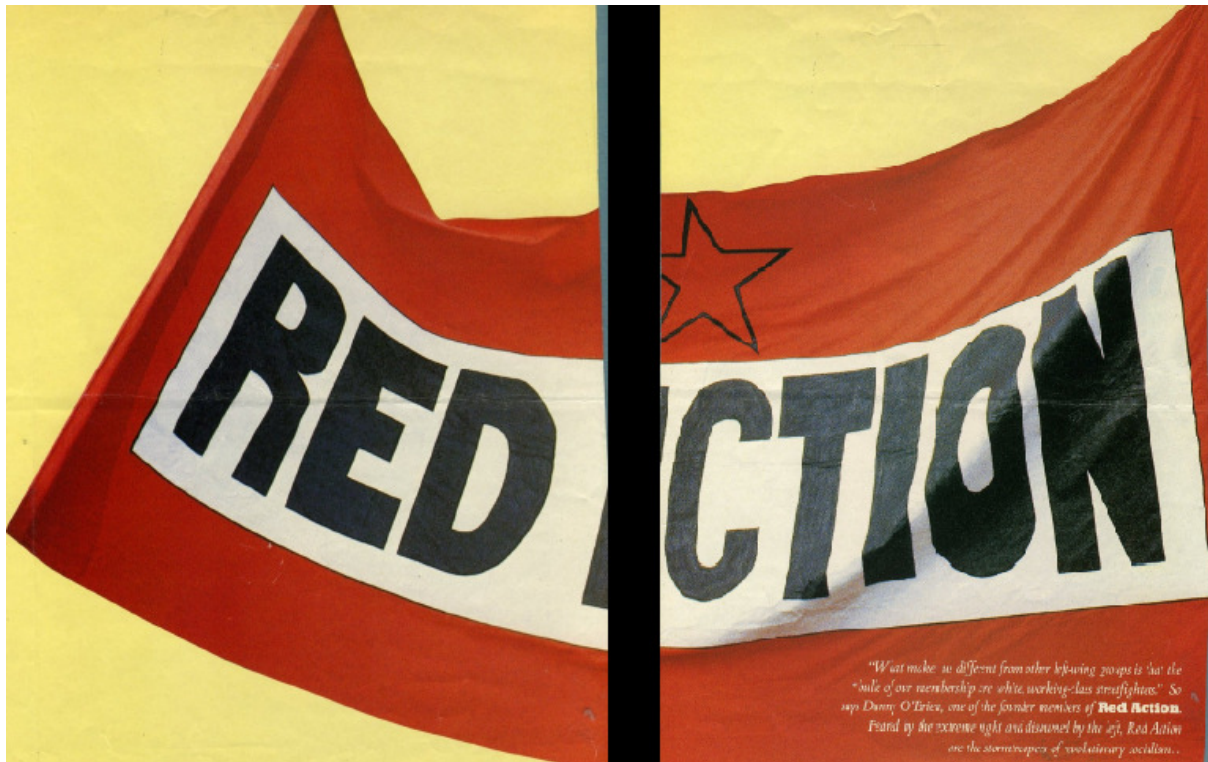


“Red Action” / Blitz / March 1988



Report by Martin McNamara & Mark Piggott

“You work with six other white guys on a building site. If any of those guys makes a racist statement starts going on about the blacks, you isolate him. Point at him and say, ‘What a fucking jerk’. Get everyone against him. Then he’s on his own. If he still persists in his racism, you hit him over the head with a house brick.”

The speaker is Joe Reilly, the self-styled leader of Red Action. Reilly is a tall, lean Dubliner whose eyes stare confidently from behind tinted glasses. He is addressing a contingent of Red Action hard core at one of their weekly meetings upstairs in a seedy North London pub. Before him are a gang of twenty young white men and one Asian, lounged around with pint glasses and hangovers from the previous night’s fund-raising social for INLA members who are in jail. These are skinheads and casuals who would look more at home at a National Front demo than at a meeting of revolutionary socialist anti-racists. But then Red Action is no ordinary left-wing organisation.

In 1981 the Socialist Workers Party expelled a number of its members. There were many reasons, both political and social. Within the SWP a section had found themselves to be at odds with the leadership of the party, who were mainly middle class and well educated. This same crowd that seemed always to be at the front of the SWP demos, taking the flak, found themselves drinking together and getting more dissatisfied. There were rows. Many had joined the SWP because of its links with the Anti-Nazi League. The confrontational policies of the ANL, fighting the National Front on the streets, were the sort of politics they could understand. Now the SWP wanted to disband ANL, but this crowd felt there was still a need for them. They didn’t want to sit down and talk about fascism, they wanted to go out and hit it.

They found themselves at odds with the rest of the movement. They were called racists, sexists, pissheads basically, whose only interest in being in the SWP was that it was a good excuse for a ruck. And then there were the political lines they wanted the party to take, especially over the Irish issue: they wanted full support for the IRA. Inevitably some were kicked out. Many others left voluntarily.

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Their new party was to become Red Action.

Despite being based mainly in London and numbering hundreds rather than thousands, Red Action have earned a reputation as the hard men of the Left. A typical Red Action member is white, male, working class, aged between 25 and 35, is a heavy drinker and is likely to have been charged at least once for offences such as drunk and disorderly and GBH. There are some women members and a small number of Asians and blacks, although in our time spent researching Red Action we didn't see much evidence of either group. But at the same time, after sitting in on their meetings, after evenings spent in pubs with them, watching them drink more and more, we never heard one of them tell a joke that could be called racist or sexist.

Most other left-wing groups refused to comment on Red Action, any further than to say they did not agree with them or their policies. Islington Anti-Racist Anti-Fascist Action (ARAFa) are a group that work in their local community trying to identify racist elements and put pressure on local council and the police to act against racists. The group experiences of Red Action have left them less than enthusiastic about their activities. We went to an ARAFA meeting to find out their views on RA and were met with a hostile response. The outcome at the meeting was a statement put together on the spot, and endorsed by the group as a whole. The statement reads:

“Islington ARAFA disassociates itself from any article primarily solely focused on Red Action. The focus of any article should be on the positive aspects of the anti-racist, anti-fascist movement with no more than a small mention of Red Action (ie, one paragraph).”

The Labour Party perhaps unsurprisingly, has never heard of Red Action. A spokesman at the party's HQ told us, “Our views on violence for political or social change are the same whether that violence is from the Left, Right or centre. As far as we're concerned these people are no different from the National Front if they pursue violent confrontation over the democratic process.’ Only the anti-fascist magazine, would comment favourably about Red Action, saying “We support them unconditionally in their fight against fascism,” with Gerry Gables, editor of the magazine, adding, “They're a good bunch of boys and girls.”

Most of the groups just didn't want to discuss them. What frightens many people on the left about Red Action is not that they're big boys who are going to come round and break a few heads. It's the damage they feel that RA can do to the whole left-wing 'cause'. To understand their reluctance to speak to the press about Red Action, you have to look at the way the Left have been treated by Fleet Street, the way attempts to promote racial awareness or the rights of homosexuals or women are jumped on and distorted to fit into the 'loonie leftie' tag. Red Action, as the Left see it, is just another club with which the right wing press beat them over the head.

Although the Left have reservations about Red Action, there have been many occasions when they've been thankful for their muscle. When anti fascists picket a pub that is used by the NF, it is Red Action who are at the forefront. They're not invited but they're there. Their philosophy can be sums up as, ‘When racists hit, we hit back harder.’ Critics see them as the National Front with a few left-wing credentials tagged on. To others they are the only left-wing group that the National Front are afraid of. The NF were not too keen to discuss them, Ian Stewart, lead singer of the racist British Movement band Skrewdriver, told us: “The only real street battles the NF has been involved in have been with Red Action.”

The NF's attitude to RA can best be shown by an incident that took place a few years ago. A freelance photographer received a tip-off that about 200 members were going away for a weekend of paramilitary exercises. They were staying on a country estate in Hampshire owned by one of the richer sympathisers. The photographer took along two members of RA as minders. They were driving around the estate looking for a way of climbing in when they were met by Derek Holland and Graham

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Burrows, two of the big wheels in the NF, walking down the road in the opposite direction. As soon as the two NF men saw who was in the car, they turned around and ran as fast as they could back into the estate. They had recognised the Red Action members. The weekend’s paramilitary exercises were called off and the NF members had to be content to sit in and discuss politics.

Other incidents that have led the Front to be so cautious include a battle outside the Shakespeare, a one-time NF pub near Chapel Market in Islington, North London two years ago. The Front had long been selling their newspapers in Chapel Market, and had been ‘moved off’ several times by Red Action; but they still used the Shakespeare. An eyewitness describes what he saw: “There were about fifty NF on one side of the road, and a similar number of Red Action on the other side. At first they were just throwing insults, then pool balls and cues. Then Red Action charged, and the NF ran. I saw Red Action catch a few of them. They were using these big, heavy bar stools, smashing the legs down on the skinheads’ faces.” Danny O’Brien, a leading figure in Red Action, is more modest about the incident. “There was a number of clashes between Red Action, along with other anti-fascists, and the National Front. In the end they were stopped from using the pub.”

O’Brien is a founder member of RA. He is in his early thirties, a short, stockily built labourer whose cheerful amenability disguises the fact that he has been in the forefront of just about every piece of violence RA have been involved in. “We’ve taken out all the top men in the NF over the last couple of years.” he says with a smile, and you get the impression that he isn’t just boasting. A Londoner of Irish heritage he is on the executive of RA. We arranged to meet O’Brien on a Saturday night at a pub in North London, but he was arrested at the door and taken off to the cells for a night on a charge of being drunk and disorderly. Apparently it’s something that happens to him from time to time and he rang up later in the week to apologise.

“What makes us different to other left wing groups;” O’Brien told us later, “is that the bulk of our membership are white, working-class street-fighters. We get a lot of stick for that. That is a problem we’re aware of. But the problem with a lot of other left-wing groups is that they’re top-heavy with middle-class professionals. There’s nothing wrong with being middle class, it’s just there’s something wrong if they can’t attract working-class people.”

Another criticism directed at Red Action is the lack of black people. “A lot of the Left, I think, are really patronising towards ethnic minorities. We feel our propaganda shouldn’t be aimed at the victims of fascism, you can’t tell them about racist attacks because they live it. Our propaganda should be aimed at the potential recruits of fascism.”

O’Brien wanted to stress that there is a thinking, political side to Red Action. “The people who join Red Action do so because they believe in revolutionary socialism. They don’t just do it because they want to beat someone up. Sometimes in the past we haven’t been too discerning about our members. But it is so unrewarding to be a member of Red Action that you don’t get people joining for the wrong reasons.”

An overheard conversation between two skinheads sitting on a bus is one example of people joining for “wrong reasons”. It is a Saturday afternoon and they are on their way home from a football match. They are having a heated argument about which group they should join - the NF or Red Action. The problem for them is trying to decide which will offer the greater opportunities for nicking. One feels that because Red Action are the smaller organisation, they’ll get picked on more and that will mean more fights. The other feels that the NF will offer a greater selection of opponents from black and other ethnic groups, from the police and from the wide range of left-wing groups. The two get off the bus, still arguing, unable to come to a satisfactory decision.

O’Brien is unconcerned that some Red Action members have previously been involved with the National Front. “I don’t think that’s anything to be ashamed of. Most of us, myself included, held racist

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views. If someone flirts with the NF in their teens, I'm not saying it's good but a lot of quite decent people get involved. But they learn.”

When you're growing up as a young white male, ways of finding excitement usually involve friends, fighting and football. The NF knows that; that's how it gets its members. Red Action, unlike most left-wing groups, knows it too.

West Ham United's Inner City Firm (ICF) are a long-established and notorious football crew with strong NF connections, at least until recently. Now there are rumours that NF paper-sellers get beaten up outside Upton Park, West Ham's home ground, and that the Firm itself has been taken over by Red Action and SWP supporters.

Their methods of persuasion are evidenced by a reported incident between two strapping young men sitting at the bar late one evening in a dubious East Ham pub. The two were strangers, but wearing similar claret'n'blue West Ham colours, they were soon engaged in the usual light hearted tomfoolery. At some point one of them began to tell a racist joke, prompting the other to knock him off his stool and proceed to beat him up. He was then placed back on his stool and told why he had been given such violent treatment. The recipient of this crash course in race awareness is now a fully paid-up member of RA.

What puts many people off Red Action is their support for the INLA and IRA. “We could double our membership in six months if we toned down on Ireland” says O'Brien. Red Action's involvement in Northern Ireland consists of raising money for INLA prisoners and giving them and their families' moral support. “We organise trips to Belfast each year and many of our members, who come from white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant traditions and have no personal connections with Ireland, are finding that they agree with the struggle.” The stand on Ireland is typical of Red Action. “If you want a revolution;” says O'Brien, “there's going to be war, bloodshed, death. You can't have a revolution with roses.”

O'Brien cites RA's stand on Ireland as another reason that he believes its members join for the right reasons. “Our politics are quite demanding. A dilettante will not join a small left-wing group that sells papers saying ‘Up the IRA’, it's dangerous.”

The “Bloody Sunday” march in London in January looked dangerous. In the previous week the Commons had been told there would be no prosecutions of the RUC over their alleged “shoot to kill” policy and the Birmingham Six had had their appeal turned down. Red Action had their contingent at the march, along with virtually every other left-wing group. The National Front announced that they would be holding a counter-march to oppose the “IRA followers insulting the British people”. Violence was expected.

Police presence was heavy and it soon became obvious that the marchers and counter-demonstrators would not have any chance to get near each other. The NF contingent were lined up behind a row of crush barriers and surrounded by mounted police. Fifty ugly-looking skinheads and some of the NF's top men, including Steve Brady, stood baying at the marchers. They were shouting, ‘IRA scum!’, the marchers were shouting ‘Nazi scum!’ Some of the marchers moved towards them, only to be hurled back in line by the police. The NF were shepherded away up a back street, but not without a few arrests on both sides.

It was only later, when we met up with some of the Red Action contingent, that we discovered a few had managed to get into the NF ranks. “We were right in the middle of them;” boasted Malcolm, an 18-year-old RA member. “They didn't even notice. They were shouting, ‘Hang the IRA’ at the marchers and we said, ‘Here we are! Come on then!’ and they all just backed off. They didn't want to know’.” The marchers were all heading for the rally in the town hall with speakers including Ken

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Livingstone and Diane Abbott, but he wasn't interested: “Fuck the rally. I want to get at the NF!”

Malcolm was introduced to RA by a friend of his girlfriend's a year and a half ago. Since then he has been one of the movement's more enthusiastic members. He was eager to tell us about RA's latest scheme: “We want to restart Rock against Racism. We're gonna call it the Cable Street Beat.”

“Rock Against Racism” was aligned to the Anti-Nazi League, putting on gigs featuring top musical acts of the day. Cable Street, in the 1930's, was the scene of a famous East End battle between local Jews and Mosley's Blackshirts, which the Jews won overwhelmingly. According to Malcolm, “We've already got some badges made up and some gigs lined up in Brixton.”

At the meeting above the pub, Reilly is trying to get some sort of reaction from those present. In front of us a red-headed young man is slumped in his chair, his eyes closed, the beer glass in his hand looking close to slipping from his fingers. He is not taking part in the discussion. Reilly wants to get across the ways you can deal with racism; isolating racists. One member wants to attack a Skrewdriver gig. The crowd gets more animated at the thought of violence. Reilly dismisses the idea on practical grounds - he doesn't think RA could get the necessary couple of hundred people together at the moment. The crowd slumps back into apathy.

“We should never have survived;” says Danny O'Brien. “We didn't have any of the brains or the organisational abilities. We just wanted to meet the fascists head on. We're the abortion that lived.”

Ends

